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# Experiences of LGBTQ Male Students of Color in a Predominantly White Environment

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**Abstract:** The limited literature on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer people of color (LGBTQ-PoC) tends to focus on heterosexism in ethnic/racial communities and racism in white LGBTQ communities. This qualitative study, informed by Intersectionality, and Narrative Inquiry, expands on how to create spaces that are more inclusive for LGBTQ students of color on college campuses. This study documents and analyzes the stories of LGBTQ male college students of color regarding their academic and social interactions, and challenges encountered while navigating a predominantly white environment. Data was collected using semi-structured individual interviews. Questions focused on how participants' identities developed, where they sought inclusive spaces, and how they came to build upon inclusivity. Data analysis employed an iterative coding process and theme development co-constructed with the participants. Themes, co-constructed with the participants, include: (a) identity development, (b) cultural influence, (c) finding and creating space, (d) emotions, and (e) inclusion on campus. Although participants cited Cultural Centers and an LGBTQ living community as spaces of inclusion, the institution needs to work together with several advocacy-oriented areas on campus to make inclusivity an institutional priority.

**Keywords:** *LGBTQ-PoC, college, male, intersectionality*

“College, it’s been an experience of just being angry and working through to come to a place, and still working to a place, where I can accept myself and my identities without being dragged down by what is actually represented by the larger culture” (Edwin). For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students of color (LGBTQ-SoC), being in a predominantly white higher education institution can result in barriers. Cases highlighted in this study exemplified that both LGBTQ student organizations and ethnic/racial organizations rejected LGBTQ-SoC. While college is a temporary space for some students, the negative experiences that they may face often mirrors the challenges that LGBTQ-People of Color (LGBTQ-PoC) face in society as a whole.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that the college environment has a significant impact on establishing identity, especially for traditional undergraduates. While in college, students undergo a process in which they start to define themselves through interests, clothing, and mannerisms. For LGBTQ-SoC, this definition could include gender and sexual expression.

Students could also face challenges depending on their campus environment and level of expression. For LGBTQ-PoC, religion, cultural norms, and values become an additional barrier that can create challenges (Patton, 2011; Vaccaro, 2011). In order to limit the effects of discrimination, ethnic/racial minority students and LGBTQ students often seek identity-based groups for support. While conducting a study with LGBTQ-SoC activists on a campus, Vaccaro (2011) reported, “participants expressed a need for social support and they longed for safe spaces where their queer and ethnic/racial identities could be embraced,” (p. 359). Research into what types of support LGBTQ-SoC need in order to limit the effects of discrimination and cope with minority stressors is limited. This study explored how the intersection of LGBTQ-SoC’s ethnic/racial and LGBTQ identities contributed to perceptions of inclusivity on a college campus. Through highlighting the importance of intersectional analysis and understanding how LGBTQ-PoCs’ identities face challenges from various communities and institutions, the study provides a background also highlights the importance of creating inclusive spaces for LGBTQ-SoC on college campuses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Identity Development

Identity development is a fluid process, with stops, starts, and possible backtracking that can take on several forms and manifestations. There is no correct way to go develop a sense of identity. The process aspect comes from the thought that identity development can occur through many stages and a span of many years, and thus is not formulaic or linear. For LGBTQ-PoC, the identity development process can be turbulent, with the final product being an individual who is positive and fulfilled by who they are. Traditional models of identity development (Cass, 1979, 1984; Fassinger, 1991) focus on a eurocentric perspective of sexual orientation and gender identity (Bilodeau & Ren, 2005). Modern models provide new perspectives on the experience of multiple and intersecting identities related to race and ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, socioeconomic class, ability, and spirituality. Exploring LGBTQ identities and their relation to social classes and class systems poses questions about how non-heterosexual identities intersect with class privilege and oppression.

D'Augelli's Life Span (1994) approach to identity development offers a more comprehensive representation to identity development. However, the Life Span model still only caters to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual members of the LGBTQ community. However, it can be altered to include trans\* and queer members of color to create a more accurate representation of identity development especially as how it can incorporate intersectionality and the experiences of LGBTQ-PoC. The Life Span approach "suggests that identities may be very fluid at certain times in the life span and more fixed at others and that human growth is intimately connected to and shaped by environmental and biological factors," (Bilodeau & Renn, p. 28). This approach is simplified into six processes that operate independently and are not ordered in stages; exiting heterosexuality, developing a personal identity, developing a social identity, becoming an offspring, developing

an intimacy status, and entering a community. During the exiting process, the individual begins to realize that there are various identities other than what society has prescribed to be "normal." The process of coming-out is as an example of developing a personal identity. The individual is able to align themselves with an identity and then able to share it with their community (develop a social identity). During becoming an offspring, the individual comes-out to their parents. When the individual is able to form intimate relationships with individuals then they have developed an intimate status. Finally, entering a community states that the individual has come out in multiple areas of their life and is an active member within the community.

Individuals can go in and out of several of these processes at a time, as well as stop and backtrack, depending on environment and life stage. With intersectionality incorporated in identity development models, non-heterosexual identities across cultures can be represented and the diversity that exists within the LGBTQ community can be celebrated.

### Intersectionality Theory

Coined by Crenshaw (1995), the term *intersectionality* derives from the understanding that various identities lie in different points of oppression and privilege and shape the experiences of people who share common identities. Crenshaw used intersectionality to describe the experiences of battered women of color in the legal system. Black women of color, due to their identities, face additional barriers and have to navigate the legal system differently than white women. In the case of minority populations, having multiple marginalized identities create additional barriers that the person must overcome than their privileged counterparts. Intersectional analysis has been applied not only when viewing gender and race, but various identities: class (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005), ability (Shaw, Chan, & McMahon, 2012), age (Hopkins & Pain, 2007), education (Museus & Griffin, 2011), and law (Williams, 2009). It is important to point out that, "Intersectional subordination need not be

intentionally produced, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment,” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 1249). Intersectionality opens up a dimension that allows for the incorporation of rich experiences that individuals with multiple identities can provide. It helps to clarify how individuals with multiple identities navigate society, and challenges previous known assumptions about single identities. LGBTQ-PoC often face barriers and stressors that arise due to their multiple and intersecting minority statuses, some of which have yet to be extensively studied (Meyer, 2003). LGBTQ-PoC can face heterosexist oppression from their ethnic/racial communities and racism from the LGBTQ community.

### **Homosexism in Communities of Color**

There has been documentation of Black/African-American students grappling with the intersection of their race/ethnicity and their LGBTQ identity, especially while attending historically black colleges (Patton, 2011; Poynter & Washington, 2005). Marginalized communities with long running histories of discrimination have established support systems and tools to protect against discriminatory practices. Although some LGBTQ-PoC have access to resources that enable them to be resilient against heterosexist stigma, the potential to experience discrimination from their ethnic/racial communities still exists. Discrimination towards LGBTQ-PoC arise from cultural factors including the importance of family, traditional gender roles, conservative religious values, and widespread heterosexism (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000; Bonilla & Porter, 1990; Lemelle & Battle, 2004; Moradi et al., 2010; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Ward, 2005).

Heterosexism in Latino/Hispanic communities stems from the threat that homosexuality has strong traditional gender roles and the continuation of the family unit (Bonilla & Porter, 1990; Moradi, et al. 2010; Verduzco, 2014). The family unit is at the center of Latin/Hispanic culture and a reason of why heterosexism exists in

these spaces (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000; Rosario et al., 2004). In addition, *machismo*, the cultural norm that perpetuates patriarchy, creates a code by which men must abide. These norms include a patriarchal culture that benefits from concise gender roles, and power dynamics that place masculinity on a higher ground than femininity. In Latino/Hispanic communities, homosexuality has become taboo. Homosexual has become a derogatory label rather than a positive identity (Han, 2007). Because homosexual has become a derogatory term in Latino/Hispanic culture, there lacks a positive, self-affirming term for anyone who identifies within the LGBTQ community.

African American communities share similarities with Latino/Hispanic communities in that strong cultural values dictate the perception of homosexuality and perpetuation of heterosexism. African American culture places a high emphasis on family, marriage, procreation, and commitment to the community (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000). Racism in the United States has created a unique culture within African American communities in which individuals create their own support systems and networks. However, LGBTQ individuals face rejection and homophobia from friends, family, religious figures, and the community at large (Meyer, 2010). Religious figures both directly and indirectly foster and perpetuate a homophobic ideology that makes its way into African American households (Lewis, 2003; Ward, 2005). Acceptance of homosexuality varies in African American communities. African-Americans are less likely than whites to both see homosexuality as wrong, and favor gay rights laws (Lewis, 2003). Homosexuality becomes tolerable when it is something private that does not permeate into everyday conversation. However, African Americans can relate to the discrimination that the LGBTQ communities and are in support of laws that favor the LGBTQ community (Akerlund & Cheung 2003; Meyer 2010).

### **Racism in the LGBTQ Community**

Similar to how members of ethnic/racial communities discriminate against LGBTQ-PoC,

members of LGBTQ communities perpetuate symbols that are harmful for LGBTQ-PoC. Subtle types of racism can be found in popular media such as the television shows *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which portray the LGBTQ community as being upper-middle class and white (Han, 2007). When characters of color shown, they are portrayed as straight (Han, 2007; Poynter & Washington, 2005). In this sense, being a person of color and being gay are mutually exclusive. This frame of thinking is extremely harmful for individuals who embrace both identities because their dual identities are not validated.

Gay organizations themselves promote and reinforce whiteness in gay life (Han, 2007; Ward, 2008). Han (2007) documented gay Latino/Hispanic men's experiences with discrimination in the Castro district of San Francisco. Although the Castro is regarded as a haven for the LGBTQ community, LGBTQ-PoC are treated as second-class citizens. White gay men have to provide one form of identification to enter white bars. However, there have been instances where white bars denied access to gay men of color, other gay men of color needed to provide two forms of identification. Other accounts support that LGBTQ-PoC have been excluded from LGBTQ community events, spaces, and leadership positions (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Ward, 2008). LGBTQ-PoC often state that they feel invisible to members of the white LGBTQ community (Balsam, et al., 2011). White gays are elevated as being the epitome of the LGBTQ community, leaving LGBTQ-PoC invisible in the sidelines (Han, 2007). When LGBTQ-PoC enter the community, they are often exoticized, fetishized, and objectified sexually by white members (Han, 2007). The LGBTQ community perpetuates a culture that devalues LGBTQ-PoC and elevates white gay males. This is problematic since the lack of LGBTQ-PoC in leadership positions denies LGBTQ- youth of color from having positive role models or mentors that could make their life development easier.

### Minority Stress Theory

Minority Stress Theory literature highlights that marginalized populations that face discriminatory incidents have high levels of mental and physical health issues, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Meyer, 2010). Most discriminatory incidents include microaggressions: brief, daily assaults on marginalized individuals, which can be social or environmental, verbal or nonverbal, and intentional or unintentional (Moradi et al., 2010; Poynter, 2005; Romero, 2003; Sue, 2007, 2008; Torres, 2009; Wei et al., 2010; Yosso, 2009). Excessive, prolonged exposure to microaggressions has links to poor mental, depression, and physical, perceived stress, health (Balsam et al., 2011). LGBTQ-PoC often state that they have experienced an incident of microaggression from white LGBTQ individuals as well as from their ethnic/racial communities (Balsam et al., 2011; Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Han, 2007; Vaccaro, 2011; Zamboni, 2007). In a study conducted in New York, Los Angeles, and Miami, Bisexual Latino/Hispanic men exposed to instances of homophobia and racism within the last year experienced high levels of distress (Diaz et al., 2001). From hearing that being is gay is not normal to being objectified sexually, these negative exposures led to 80% of the participants citing that they had feelings of sadness and/or depression in the last six months.

Incidents of microaggressions and discrimination also occur in higher education institutions. LGBTQ-SoC often have to combat instances of discrimination alone, which can lead to high levels of burnout and mental and physical health issues (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011).

### LGBTQ College Resource Centers

LGBTQ resource centers began to appear on college campuses following the death of Matthew Shepard, a gay student from the University of Wyoming. On October 6, 1998, 21-year-old Matthew Shepard was beaten, tortured, and left to die outside of Laramie. The death of Matthew Shepard brought national attention to issue of hate crimes against the LGBTQ community, and how

college campuses are supporting their LGBTQ students. LGBTQ centers were created to promote more inclusive campus climates that provide safe and positive spaces for LGBTQ-identifying students. Even with the creation of LGBTQ centers, LGBTQ students still report issues with claiming their identities, navigating disclosure of their sexual orientation, and negotiating heteronormative campus environments (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). Although LGBTQ college resource centers work on campuses through Safe Zone Trainings, programming, and establishing student organizations, there are individuals in the community who are left out in their programming and educational efforts. For example, trans\* students face overt heterosexism through harassment, violence, marginalization, and tokenization (Marine & Catalano, 2015). Further, racial/ethnic issues are nonexistent in programming and events sponsored by campus LGBTQ organizations, leaving LGBTQ-SoC to find refuge in ethnic/racial organizations. Poynter and Washington (2005) provided recommendations for student affairs professionals on how to create inclusive spaces for LGBTQ-SoC. Additional research in this area has been sparse since this article. According to Ward (2013), students' perceptions of acceptance within an institution correlate with their achievement levels. From a student affairs perspective, spaces for LGBTQ-SoC should exist to integrate this population into a university setting similar to various other marginalized groups of society on campus.

### **Cultural Resource Centers**

Harper and Hurtado (2007) stated that although students of color are enrolling in higher education at increasing rates, they still describe potentially harmful experiences and perceive their campus environment distinctly. For example, while attending predominantly white institutions, students of color have stated that they feel as though they have to prove their intellect, face high levels of prejudice and discrimination, and feel isolated and alienated from predominantly white activities (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). Students stated that Black cultural centers enabled

them to feel a sense of belonging and family that they were lacking from the larger institution (Patton, 2011). Cultural organizations and centers provide opportunities for students to connect with others who share their cultural background, have similar upbringings, and struggles navigating their institution. However, similarly to LGBTQ resource centers, cultural centers often neglect LGBTQ-SoC during programming. Without being able to have visible validation on campuses for their dual identities, LGBTQ-SoC have no support systems and have to navigate their academics and identities alone.

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

This study explored the experiences of LGBTQ-SoC at a university in the Rocky Mountain region. The initial goal of the study was to explore how the intersection of LGBTQ-SoC's ethnic/racial and LGBTQ identities contributed to perceptions of inclusivity on a college campus. By the end of the study, it became clear that it was important to give a medium for the participants to voice their experiences on campus and to provide a space where they state how they would like to see as inclusive spaces.

### **Positionality Statement**

In adherence with qualitative research methodology, it is important that I, as the researcher, share my own social identities. I identify as a LGBTQ-PoC being a Cis-Gender Gay Mexican American. When I first started college, I was not confident in my sexual orientation, for most of my first year I could not say the word gay. After I connected with other LGBTQ students of color, I began to understand what it meant to be a gender-sexual minority and a person of color. With a fuller understanding of the intersections of my identities, I found it important to highlight the narratives of other students and understand their experiences in college.

### **Research Framework**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was the qualitative model used in this study. Qualitative methodology was used, because "qualitative

researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them,” (Mertens, 2010). PAR differs from conventional research in three ways; (a) it focuses on research that enables action, (b) it advocates for power to be shared between the researcher and participants, and (c) it advocates that participants be involved in the process actively (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). In addition to PAR, a constructivist model (Mertens, 2010) in which participants create meanings from their experiences guided this project.

### Data Collection

In order to gain an understanding of LGBTQ-SoCs' lived experiences dealing with their double minority identities on campus, I utilized semi-structured interviews and a two-tiered member checking protocol (Krefting, 1991). I recruited participants using snowball sampling (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997) that used to recruit hard to reach populations. Participants of the study needed to meet the following criteria: (a) self-identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, or Queer; (b) self-identified as an ethnic/racial/ethnic minority; (c) was a current undergraduate student (sophomore or higher), or recent graduate (no more than 3 semesters); and (d) was 18 years of age or older.

Participants contacted me to state that they were interested in participating in the study. I followed up via email to set up an interview time and location. Interview times and locations varied depending on the participant's preference. A few spaces included a study room in the library, their personal office, or my own office. During the interview, the participants chose the pseudonym utilized throughout the project to protect their identities.

The interview was semi-structured with foundational questions created by using the *The LGBTQ People of Color Microaggressions Scale* (Balsam et al., 2011) and *The Bicultural Self-Efficacy Scale* (David, Okazaki, & Saw, 2009). Interview questions (see Appendix for complete interview questions) were broken into three

sections, (a) participant introduction of self and identities, (b) reflection on their time on campus, and (c) thinking critically about what an ideal inclusive space looks like. The three sections were broken off into discussing how their dual identities affected their experiences on campus, good and bad. In addition, gave space to discuss what an ideal inclusive space that was affirming to their dual identities would look like. The interviews were on average about 30 minutes long and recorded using a digital recorder. Additional tools included a research journal to take notes and document the participants' reactions and emotions during the interview.

I transcribed the interviews and then, with the aid of a faculty mentor, used NVivo to help identify and categorize themes. In addition, incorporating member checks (Krefting, 1991), the participants played an active role in specifying whether the themes identified by my mentor and I were representative. Co-construction of the themes with the participants was important because often research involving marginalized groups rarely has the participants playing active roles outside of data collection. Additionally, I utilized methods of triangulation (Mertens, 2010) with existing literature to make sure that the project aligned with current literature on LGBTQ-PoC.

## FINDINGS

### Participant Introductions

Four students attending a university in the Rocky Mountain region participated in the study. At the time of the study, one participant was an undergraduate senior, one was recently graduated, one was a first year graduate student, and the other was a second year graduate student. Francisco was an undergraduate senior, identifying as a Bisexual Hispanic Male. For Francisco being Hispanic comes from a lot of cultural heritage and pride. Edwin recently graduated with his Bachelor's degree. He identified as an Asexual Homoromantic Latino Male. While he had the same ethnic background as Francisco, Edwin identified as Latino because he did not want to associate himself with Spain's

colonialist history. Simon was a first year graduate student, he identifies as a Femme Black Gay Male. Similarly, Xavier is a second year graduate student who also identifies as a Femme Black Gay Male.

Co-constructed with the participants, five themes emerged that highlighted their experiences on a college campus. The themes included; (a) identity development, (b) cultural influence, (c) finding and creating space, (d) emotions, and (e) inclusion on campus. These five themes followed participants' journeys and experiences through developing their identities, finding and creating space on campus, dealing with emotions, and finally looked at how to create inclusive spaces for LGBTQ-SoC.

### **Theme 1: Identity Development**

All four of the participants had an understanding of their ethnic-racial identity before coming to college. In regards to their LGBTQ identity, college was a time where most of them began to discover how they wanted to reflect their sexual or gender orientation while still figuring out how to balance that with their ethnic-racial identity.

“When I first got to college I was very sheltered and unaware of a lot of things. I was still a bud, I haven’t blossomed yet. So college has definitely helped with that because that’s when I became not only more confident in who I was but a lot more socially conscious.” (Simon)

Edwin was unable to visualize an ideal true self since he did not have a role model. The media portrays that the only identities present within the LGBTQ community are white, cisgender, middle-class, gay men. The few times that Edwin saw gay Latinos were when they were being exoticized and portrayed as predators. Edwin’s LGBTQ identity and ethnic/racial identities were far from the norm, this led Edwin to be unsure about his intersectional identities and how to fully be authentic. It was not until he reached college and met other LGBTQ students of color that Edwin was able to navigate his identities and make it his own. In addition, he has been unable to fully come

out to his parents because of the stigma that surrounds being LGBTQ in his Latino culture.

Marginalized communities with long running histories of discrimination have established support systems and tools to protect against discriminatory practices. Most of these practices include finding community and learning about cultural heritage. For LGBTQ-SoC living in a predominantly white environment, finding community relies on connecting with other students who share their dual identities or finding mentors on campus that can aid in their identity development. There are little to no courses on LGBTQ-PoC culture, so students need to seek that knowledge themselves. Xavier stated that he was able to learn about his dual identities by taking courses in Africana and Gender Studies. Although there were two classes, little crossover exists where the student needs to participate in the intersectional thinking.

Simon talked about how his ethnic-racial identity came with a lot of oppression. He brought up Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner, and Sandra Bland as examples to support the uneasiness that Blacks and African-Americans face in the United States, observing “I am a black male and what that means for me is lots of oppression - obviously. I mean, it’s always been clear when I was little, it’s just like being on your best behavior in front of white people” (Simon).

The United States’ social climate gave Simon a sort of alertness where he has to be cognizant of his blackness when being outside in public. While Simon is on alert because of his blackness, he embraces his queerness. For Simon, his gender expression is a point of pride and confidence. He recounted that there were several times where he was misgendered because of his feminine style, but was not offended. He embraced having a flare of both genders, remarking, “So being able to go out in something that expresses both my identities at once it may have confused some people but I actually take stride in it.” (Simon)

During Simon’s freshman year, he would wear extremely baggy clothes as a means to express his masculinity and blend into the gender norms that



his black community set upon him. For the release of *The Hunger Games*, Simon and his friends decorated black shirts with the Mockingjay symbol. In a spur of the moment decision, Simon bought a women's cut, at first, he was extremely nervous, but after getting positive comments, he felt that it was a right fit. This was Simon's first experience experimenting with his gender identity, and it flourished into an androgynous style embodying both masculine and femininity. Simon's awareness of his identities correlated with his environments. He specifically cited that when he is around other black men, he becomes aware of his femininity when black men on campus surround him. While Simon feels confident about his gender expression, there are times and spaces on campus where he does not know how others will react.

Xavier spoke about his ethnic-racial identity as a term of blackness. He talks that since he does not necessarily know his ancestry he cannot accurately identify as African-American, but rather with the African Diaspora.

"I primarily identify as black. Not entirely sure of origins of family, right? For various reasons.... So there's a lot about me that is rooted in blackness both because of presentation and cultural identities." (Xavier)

In terms of his gender-sexual identity, Xavier talks often that he has always performed in a feminine way but it was not until college that he began to own and embrace it.

"I have always performed in a feminine way but I have never really owned it and honored it until very recently, I would say in the last two to three years. I really came into openly identifying in a feminine gender expression or as a femme and really letting that be a key part in who I am" (Xavier).

In an aspect, Xavier, as he developed through his undergraduate environment, he began to embrace his identities and understand that it was necessary in order to be authentic. Connected with mentors on campus, Xavier began to gain a sense of authenticity in his identities and not be ashamed of how he presents himself on campus.

However, while in once sense his identity development brought a sense of wholeness it also brought issues about being accepted on campus.

When talking about his Identities, Francisco talked often as though he was not necessarily sure. This unsureness seems to derive from his cultural background growing up in a family where *machismo* or Latino gender roles dictated how he expressed his masculinity, which was in conflict with his sexual identity.

"I personally identify as being bi.... I guess personally to me I'm attracted to both genders I guess you would say," (Francisco).

Francisco encountered many barriers during his Identity development that mirrors the obstacles that seem to exist for LGBT men of color, most of it deriving from internalized homophobia. He first acted upon his same-sex attraction the week before graduating high school, but as he transitioned into college, he became a bit more recluse and felt more shame. Due to the change of environment, Francisco backtracked and became recluse of his bisexual identity. He was at a point in high school where he was developing a personal LGBTQ identity, but since he moved to a new city with new people, he was unsure of how they would react to his bisexual identity that he halted that process until he knew for sure.

"A lot of my freshmen year ... there was a lot of binge drinking because I felt like that kind of helped me forget things for a while. It kind of helped get things off of my mind" (Francisco). D'Augelli (2005), discuss that marginalization and social isolation results in negative coping mechanisms. Cultural factors complicates identity development for LGBTQ-PoC.

When Francisco studied abroad in Spain, he found two students who ended up being in another chapter of his fraternity. Through the aid of his fraternity, Francisco began to come into his sexual identity and it was no longer a point of extreme shame. A lot of Francisco's struggled with his bisexuality was rooted in his culture and how *machismo* influenced how he 1) navigated society and 2) chose to be seen in society.

## Theme 2: Cultural Influence

Most of the participants observed that their intersectional identities and expression were influenced primarily by their culture. For minorities of color, culture is a patriarchal institution that permeates several aspects of their lives. Culture has the force to shape how LGBTQ-PoC act, navigate spaces, and can even contribute to fears on campus.

*Machismo* is a powerful social construct that shapes how Latin/Hispanics view, value, and enforce gender norms in society. Similar gender constructs are evident in the African-American community in the United States. Homosexuality has become a taboo and homosexual has become derogatory instead of a positive identity (Han, 2007). The participants cited how their culture influenced how they grew up and came to understand their dual identities. Since all the participants identify as men, their cultures had strict guidelines on how to express their masculinity, and in Simon's case how to hide his femininity. Since the culture does not respect gender expressions outside the norm, Francisco and Simon had to hide their identities until they were in college and were able to develop them. For Xavier and Edwin, culture is a grounding influence that taught them how to be authentic and stray from colonialist social ideas.

For Francisco, *machismo* shaped how he came to understand his gender orientation. When talking about his family, Francisco talked about it in terms of traditions and "the way he was raised." For most of his life, he felt conflicted between his sexual orientation and his cultural traditions. In his senior year of his undergraduate and a holistic understanding of his sexual orientation, Francisco has come to understand that the shame he felt growing up was due to how he was raised, being surrounded with heavy cultural norms. However, even now his sexual orientation did not make up who he is as a person, versus how his cultural identity shapes how he creates spaces of inclusion. Francisco stated:

I don't go around telling the world about myself or I don't flaunt that I'm

bisexual. When people ask about significant, others I just kinda laugh it off. I mean, I'm not really seeing anybody anyways so I'm not really lying to them.

Growing up, Simon had to face hyper-masculinity as it was portrayed in his black community and his father. When Simon was little, he liked to dress up and have his sister paint his nails; his dad would get mad that Simon was participating in activities viewed as feminine in nature. Simon expanded on how his community emphasized that black men should act masculine, strong, aggressive, and angry. Simon had a profound effect from told that men do not cry, especially when his dad died. "I think that's why I haven't cried in years. My dad died, would have been three years in July. He died and I did not cry," (Simon).

Simon stated that his black community did not value LGBTQ identities, or at least feminine traits in men. Since he grew up understanding that it was not acceptable or even dangerous to be a feminine black male, Simon becomes nervous when he encounters a group of black football players on campus. Growing up, he encountered classmates policing his gender expression to the point that it did not become safe. He was conditioned with the understanding that "homophobia is rampant among black males." Encountering extremely masculine black men on campus, Simon gets the feeling that they are going to judge him for being a failure as a black man, or even become aggressive towards him.

Xavier aligned more racially as being black but ethnically as being African-American. Race and Ethnicity was somewhat difficult for him because he understood that due to the nature of his ancestry there is no definitive way to know where he originates. Instead, a lot of his identity is rooted in blackness because of presentation and culture.

Growing up in Ohio, Xavier was surrounded with a mixed, segregated community of whites and blacks. Moving to the Rocky Mountain region, Xavier found that there were not as many black folk, so instead of being in a community of

black folk, Xavier stood out and thus faced discrimination from the campus and LGBTQ community on campus. For Xavier, it was not really, how he saw himself on campus, but how others saw him.

Similar to Xavier, Edwin experienced how others viewed his culture and thus challenged his identity according to how stereotypes instructed him to identify. Individuals in the ace community experience little to no sexual attraction or have to develop an emotional bond in order to create sexual trust. Edwin encountered individuals who saw his sexual orientation as being contradictory with his cultural identity. Bombarded with phrases like “how can you be asexual? You’re Latino,” “you are supposed to be this spicy - sexual person;” you should be able to seduce a man just by staring him down” increased Edwin’s guilt for being asexual within the Latino community. For Edwin, cultural stereotypes increased his internal conflict. In addition, it influenced how others came to understand or dismiss his dual identities.

### **Theme 3: Finding and Creating Space**

It is difficult to navigate college being a minority student, especially being an LGBTQ-SoC. As Xavier and Edwin faced stereotypes and discrimination from individuals outside of their cultural community - many of the participants sought individuals who understood their experiences, shared their identities, and created validating spaces.

Because there were no spaces on campus for LGBTQ-SoC, all of the participants needed to find and create spaces where they felt authentic and safe on campus. All of the participants stated that either they utilized LGBTQ focused spaces or Cultural Centers on campus as spaces of inclusion, but this was very singular. In stating that, they were only able to be one identity, either a racial/ethnic minority or a sexual/gender minority, in each space. Their wholeness was fragmented since each space served a different purpose.

The participants cited cultural centers as a space shared by individuals who looked and identified like them. Most of these spaces were

utilized due to their social aspects. Two of the participants started college working at the cultural centers, so for them it is a space that first allowed them a sense of community and connectedness on campus. The other two attended the cultural centers because they wanted to be in a space with other individuals who looked like them. In a campus that is 54% white, it would make sense that students of color want to be in a space where they do not feel marginalized and/or face microaggressions. Simon stated that he when he attended a black activist club on campus; it was “so refreshing.” For some of the participants being in the cultural centers were places where it felt refreshing and like home. However, these spaces only catered for their ethnic/racial identity. Edwin stated that he was not able to talk about his LGBTQ issues or identity while he was in the Latino/Hispanic Cultural Center - not because they were being homophobic, but because they could not relate no matter how much they tried.

While the Cultural Centers were spaces of social interaction, the LGBTQ spaces on campus - the living community and the LGBTQ Office were spaces to delve deep into their sexual/gender identities and issues affecting the LGBTQ community. Most of the participants utilized these spaces because they were places of professionalism and a network of support. Identity development is an important aspect of college matriculation. Chickering (1993) states that college in a time where students begin to define themselves and understand their identities. For LGBTQ students, navigating their identities can come with its own challenges. Most of the participants sought out the LGBTQ spaces to talk about their sexual/gender identity and more complex issues affecting the LGBTQ community. While the LGBTQ Office has been a place, where tough conversations could occur and has been working to be more intersectional, the LGBTQ living community and the student organization have been exclusive of racial/ethnic minorities.

Xavier stated that he was a part of the first cohort of the LGBTQ focused living community on campus. He wanted to be a part of this space because he wanted to see how it would be like to

live with other individuals in the LGBTQ community. The first day of living in the community, Xavier interacted with another student who gave Xavier his first glimpse of the racism that is within the LGBTQ community. From this point on Xavier found his personhood invalidated, often mistaken for other black gay men on campus.

Similar to Xavier's experience, during Edwin's first couple of years on campus he and Simon would go to the LGBTQ student organization, but stopped going because of the racist environment. In several instances during meetings, racial slurs were carelessly be exercised. Edwin states, "I should not feel the residual trauma of not being in the safe space as the anxiety of being in that space when I needed to be."

With the lack of spaces on campus that fulfilled both identities, participants shared that they created their own communities and networks, which I will call "spaces." These spaces consisted of finding individuals who had similar dual identities and advocates on campus who created dialogue for the participants to express personal, academic, or identity issues they may be going through.

Instead of looking for a physical space that supported his identities, Xavier sought individuals who validated his personhood, and found that from mentors on campus. Xavier's first mentor, an advisor from a student support service, taught him what it meant to be authentic while doing the work he wants to do. His second mentor, a career counselor, taught Xavier to be himself and always stand up for himself at the same time. She was a constant reminder of the sense of community that he experienced at some level in college.

Simon and Edwin found inclusion surrounding themselves with other students who are also ethnic/racial and LGBTQ minorities on campus. When Simon was trying to figure out his gender identity, he talked to his close friends who identified as genderqueer about how they came to discover their identities. Edwin used the same circle of friends to talk about issues that arise

from their intersectional identities. Francisco had a similar experience, for him he found community while studying abroad. During his time in Spain, he was able to connect with other LGBTQ brothers of his fraternity from a different chapter. While Francisco said that his chapter was a space where he felt safe. In addition, his trip to Spain was where he began to feel that his identities did not have to be at odds with one another. His brothers oversea taught Francisco that it was okay to be bisexual and Hispanic at the same time. During a time when he was ashamed of being bisexual, however, after talking to his brothers, he found out that he needs to live his life and that his identities shouldn't matter to people who don't matter in his life. All of the participants stated that being connected with individuals who understood their experiences, thoughts, and struggles was extremely enlightening and beneficial.

#### **Theme 4: Emotions**

In order to get a broad understanding of the experiences of the participants, one factor is looking at their experiences on campus, another is providing space to voice their emotions. Often, the emotions that LGBTQ students of color experience are invalidated. Phrases like, sensitive, coddlers, and blowing things out of proportion are used to invalidate the experiences and emotions that LGBTQ students of color have on a predominantly white environment.

##### *Shame*

Although Francisco was the only one that explicitly stated that he felt ashamed for being a part of the LGBTQ community, shame or internalized homophobia is a true reality that individuals within the LGBTQ community face. Living in a heteronormative society that normalizes being straight and makes other sexual/gender identities as being pervasive or unnatural, can cause individuals who identify within the community to have negative feelings about themselves. In Francisco's case, growing up in a Hispanic family where traditions and cultural norms created an environment that looked at the LGBTQ community as being wrong, caused him to feel ashamed most of his developmental life.

### *Anger*

“College, it’s been an experience of just being angry and working through to come to a place, and still working to a place, where I can accept myself and my identities without being dragged down by what is actually represented by the larger culture” (Edwin). Edwin and Xavier talked specifically being angry about the racism that they faced from LGBTQ organizations on campus. Having to face daily microaggressions without aid from administrators on campus can be a frustrating aspect that LGBTQ students of color have to weather.

### *Alienation*

“I think I have felt a level of isolation and alienation in the city and college community as a femme more so than i’ve ever had before,” (Xavier). With limited spaces on campus for LGBTQ students of color, it would make sense why students like Xavier feel alienated. In addition, there is little focus on the issues that LGBTQ-SoC face in society in campus social or educational events. Although Edwin utilized the cultural centers as places to be surrounded with individuals who look like him, because he was unable to talk about his LGBTQ identity, it can be said that he was forced to hide his LGBTQ identity because he faced a level of alienation.

### *Unsafe*

For individuals who do not fit the standard binary narrative, navigating society can be a dangerous place. This is being seen by the increase deaths of trans women of color in the United States. In addition, as Simon stated earlier, the social climate of black people creates the sense that being a minority can be unsafe. Simon expanded on this fear by stating that whenever he encounters a group of black football players, he feel nervous because he does not know how they are going to react. Although Simon is confident about his feminine style, it is impossible to predict how individuals outside of the community are going to react.

## **Theme 5: Inclusion on Campus**

The need for inclusive campuses comes from the assertion that inclusive campuses help students, especially marginalized students, succeed academically (Ward, 2013). As minority stress theory states, individuals who are victims of microaggressions have poorer mental and physical health than individuals who do not. In order to allow more space for the participants to describe their time on campus, the participants described both positive and negative experiences when it came to inclusivity. In addition, they described what they viewed as an inclusive campus.

### *Positive*

Having a sense of community is the biggest indicator whether an environment is inclusive or not. All of the participants found spaces on campus that they felt were inclusive for their identities. Francisco and Edwin cite multicultural Greek fraternities as spaces of inclusion. For Edwin, it was the first place where he felt that he could be both of his identities at the same time. In Francisco’s case, it was a sense of brotherhood that contributed to the space feeling like home. The narrative of home resonates with another participant, Simon. He stated that the Black Activism Club on campus was the first time he felt like he was at home on campus. Surrounding oneself with likeminded individuals was also refreshing. Xavier, found the Women’s Conference as being extremely refreshing and “rejuvenating.” During this conference, activist B.Cole, who works with the Brown Boi Project, spoke about ending homophobia and transphobia in communities of color. B.Cole talked about what seeking justice looks like and what being an authentic human being on an everyday basis looks like. Xavier’s experience on campus was one where he needed to exert his humanness and fight to be authentic in a space that invalidated his identities. Inclusive spaces on campus were those that focused on creating community for minority students, but going deeper, spaces that fight to create change and provide spaces of representation for minority students.

### *Negative*

On the flip-end, lack of representation were key areas that the participants cited as exclusive on campus. Primarily citing the lack of diversity on campus. Francisco talked about the lack of hispanics in the Business School, and Xavier talked about the whiteness and cisgenderism that permeates in student leadership roles on campus. To a degree, the lack of diversity in these areas fall upon minority students to engage in these areas. However, when there is limited advertisement or motivation within the institution to increase diversity in these areas they will remain exclusive. Simon and Edwin specifically talked about exclusive practices that affect LGBTQ students. During their junior year, the LGBTQ living community relocated to the athletic side of campus into one of the high-tiered living option. Simon cites this as a problem for two reasons, 1) financially exhibits lower SES students, and 2) safety.

### *Ideal*

At the end of the interview, the participants described what the ideal inclusive community would look like. The participants stated that the ideal inclusive community is a place where they feel comfortable and safe. In addition, it is a space where they are challenged to grow and able to have conversations about their dual identities.

## **DISCUSSION**

Although this study only considered the experiences of LGBTQ men of color, the negative experiences that they faced during their time in college mirrors the challenges that LGBTQ-PoC face in society as a whole. The study helped to broaden the scope of literature on the experiences of LGBTQ Students of Color in higher education. In addition, through highlighting the experiences of four students' experiences with heterosexism and racism, it brings awareness to the need of more inclusive spaces for LGBTQ-SoC. Just as the participants struggled to find space, and often faced with burden or racism, both communities of color and LGBTQ communities marginalize LGBTQ-PoC. Future research should look at how individuals with varied intersections, two-spirited, gender non-conforming, women, trans students,

etc. navigate their college environment and find inclusive spaces. While minority populations have been able to build community while facing adversity, student affairs professionals and the institution-at-large would be able to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of these students and take action to establish inclusive and safe spaces on campus.

The experiences of the participants showed insight on how they create community on campus and navigate exclusive areas on campus. Overall, each participant cited either the Cultural Centers or the LGBTQ - living community as spaces of inclusion. However, each space was singular, in saying that the participants were only able to be one identity - either an ethnic/racial or sexual/gender minority in each space. When they tried to be both at the same time, they faced either racism or heterosexism from each community. Instead of finding community on campus, the participants created community by interacting with individuals on campus that either understood their identities or shared them. Often the burden to create inclusive communities placed on the back of minority college students; however, while these students can make their environment work they should not be responsible for changing the campus environment.

Across the nation, there have been several instances of LGBTQ students facing discrimination on college campuses. Title IX protects students from harassment based on their sex, sexual orientation, and gender. According to Title IX, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance (U.S Department of Education, 2014)." In 2014 and 2016, non-legal binding guidelines were issued by the U.S. Department of Education stating that [transgender](#) students are protected from sex-based discrimination under Title IX. It instructed public schools to treat transgender students consistent with their gender identity in academic life (U.S Department of Education, 2014, 2016).

Similarly, to how sexual and gender identity is protected by the federal government, so is race and ethnic identity. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that if “a recipient of federal assistance is found to have discriminated and voluntary compliance cannot be achieved, the federal agency providing the assistance should either initiate fund termination ... or [refer to legal action]” (Title VI, 1964). According to Article VI, Clause 2 of the Constitutions, federal laws constitute supreme law of the land. States and organizations that receive funding from the federal government, like public higher education institutions should adhere to federal laws prohibiting LGBTQ-PoC discrimination. Although, I do recognize that the 2014 and 2016 statements issued by the U.S Department of Education are non-binding they should be used as roadmaps to create more inclusive policies that prohibit discrimination on campus, and creates inclusive spaces for Queer and Trans students. In addition, there is no legal binding document that protects LGBTQ-PoC as a singular group, but their dual identities are protected under law. The main concerns that the participants voiced were lack of validation of their identities and the fear of safety to express their identities. I am recommending that the institution should work together with other activist-based offices on campus to make creating an inclusive environment for LGBTQ students of color a high priority.

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